



Debate Article

Borderlands archaeology and the quest for an improved ‘walled-off salad’ recipe

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Archaeologists should always have their say in the interpretation of the archaeological record. Moreover, they should not allow those interpretations to be misappropriated by others, whether politicians, journalists or specialists of other disciplines. By contending that borders are a timely topic for archaeological attention, Emily Hanscam and Brian Buchanan (2023) make a decisive epistemological step forward within the field, also opening up the potential of the discipline’s specialised knowledge for wider dissemination and impact. They advance from a straightforward position: the argument that re-bordering in the contemporary world, notably through the increasing fencing of borders (Bissonnette & Vallet 2020), often originates in a normative and normalising discourse on the past. The best example, according to the authors, is Hadrian’s Wall, which appears as a common justification for the building of contemporary walls on a growing number of international borders. Their text unfolds a comparison between the archaeological findings about that one short segment of the Roman *limes* in northern Britain and the supposed properties of the contemporary infrastructure on the US/Mexico border, which successive US presidents have sought to reinforce—chief among them Donald Trump.

As a political geographer dedicated to the analysis of contemporary borders, I find Hanscam and Buchanan’s (2023) proposal timely and appealing. Indeed, I have called for a better contextualisation of border-making to overcome the excessively narrow common narrative of their invention, in 1648, following the European Thirty Years’ War. If we follow the stimulating proposal formulated by one of the first geographers to theorise this phenomenon, then we can see that “The border is a bio-social invariant, a structure, which morphological expressions are outstandingly variable” (Raffestin 2005, author’s translation). In a post-colonial moment, one therefore needs to open our analysis in a multidisciplinary manner, requiring us to read the past in search of complex definitions of limits and interfaces. In this perspective, Hadrian’s Wall, which the authors duly present as a “multi-faceted complex used to observe and manage human mobility” (Hanscam & Buchanan 2023: 1008), mirrors recent proposals within border studies, notably the observation that “isolating a single function of the border does not allow us to grasp the flexibility of this institution” (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013: 7). Other examples could be mobilised, such as the Bronze Age ‘Very Long Wall’ in what is now northern Syria (Geyer *et al.* 2010) or many walls of various later dates in Central Asia and Iran (e.g. Khozhaniyazov 2018; Alibaigi 2019), which I find fascinating in relation to more recent processes of discrimination between nomadic and sedentary societies.

The illustrations of the article, however, do not entirely serve the authors' aims. Indeed, the figures tend to build a similarity between the two case studies when the text seeks to undermine the analogy between them. Be it through the photographs (e.g. Figure 5, which is misleading because large portions of the Rio Grande border have been fenced since; see the photographic exhibition, *Al río / To the River*, by Zoé Leonard) or the maps, these visuals are problematic, both due to the symmetry they introduce and the anachronism they induce. Regarding Hadrian's Wall, for example, mapping this infrastructure and making it appear to be linear may be as false as Trump claiming to have built many more kilometres of 'wall', when, in fact, he mostly duplicated or triplicated barriers on the most accessible segments of the border. Indeed, if Hadrian built a 120km-long wall in AD 122–128 between the Solway Firth and the River Tyne, just 20 years later, Emperor Antoninus Pius built another wall, 63km in length, some 150km further north. The latter was, in turn, to be abandoned 40 years later, leaving an indeterminate space between the two fortification lines; "it is often forgotten that walls themselves are mobile" (Amilhat Szary 2020: 38, author's translation).

The authors also insist on the fact that the monumentality of this portion of the ancient *limes* corresponds with the need to impose on the fringes of the empire a symbol of Roman power and authority, foretelling the growing 'spectacularisation' of contemporary international borders (De Genova 2012)—regardless of the disproportion between the investment in a hyper-visual regime of border management and the dismissal of any kind of serious evaluation regarding the impact of such fortification. The re-bordered limit works as a self-fulfilling promise of its own self: since it was so difficult and expensive to build, this proves how terrible the danger was, from which this barrier protects (Amilhat Szary 2015). Here, the authors come back to landscape analysis, following the anthropologist's intuition that materiality is rooted in time thickness (Ingold 2007). Although certainly challenging, it would be mesmerising to dive into the political and performative dimension of landscape in the archaeological past (Thomas 1993).

Hanscam and Buchanan's (2023: 1005) main concern, is to reduce the "significant gap between public perception of border zones and theoretical innovation in archaeology". Emphasising the popularity of archaeology with wider audiences and the media, they wish for their scientific results to be re-formulated in order to become more accessible and to provide counter-narratives to over-simplified interpretations of the past, where the dichotomy of 'us' (Roman) and 'them' (barbarians) cannot be reduced to feeding the plot of a fantasy fiction, such as the highly popular *Game of Thrones*. Here, they may be sinning by an excess of confidence in the power of their findings; border and migration scholars know well the unfortunate experience of seeing their scientific conclusions swept aside with a wave of the ideological hand.

By calling for "resilient archaeology for a global future" (Hanscam & Buchanan 2023: 1012), however, the authors offer the archaeological community an ambitious and timely challenge: that of contributing to a much-needed reunification of knowledge (Lowenthal 2019) essential for understanding global events and threats. That archaeology could contribute to testing and enriching the recent definition I have sought to advance of borders as "space-time that materialises norms" (Amilhat Szary 2020: 200; author's translation) would also be a major contribution to the development of contemporary critical border studies. This is a recipe that, without a doubt, could become as well known as the salad whose name the title of this short text abusively distorts!

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